



The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration

A Daily Reading Program on the Christian Theology of Creation

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The Vision and Spiritual Direction of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Orthodox Patriarchs

A Course of Daily Theological Reflections
on Christian Responsibility for
the Care and Keeping of God's Creation

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P.O. Box 7348



Santa Rosa, California 95407



(707) 573-3161



Introduction

St Paul writes, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

The world of the Early Church was a different place than what Christians face today. For the desert fathers and mothers the evils with which they encountered were simpler and natural consequences of the ancient Fall. These included sickness, death, the demons, and personal vices. These were easily understood and obvious. Personal asceticism plus prayer and fasting leading to purification and transformation could counter these forces. The sins of that day did not lead to the perversion and corruption of the natural world. The same was true for the larger society. There was pollution and depletion of resources, but these were the result of personal choices. They did not corrupt the creation itself or violate the natural order as God created it.

Today the world is distinctly different. We still deal with traditional sins, but a new genre of sin has emerged. It is sin integrated into the design of society. This might be called "structural sin." Whether we like it or not, a result is that we cannot live in contemporary society without participating in this new genre of sin. To make this more complex, there is no personal *ascesis* by which we can avoid these sins. We encounter them first in social attitudes which emphasize consumerism, materialism, individualism and the extreme privatization of planetary resources. Modern science and its myriad of technological ramifications amplify this condition through the consequences of systems of transportation, toxics in the food chain, plastic containers and energy use all of which cause a person to add to the degradation of the world's biological systems. These and many other global systems are embued with these unintentional but nevertheless harmful side effects. We are witnessing a worldly manifestation of the principalities and powers in the physical world that promote our participation in sinful actions and assumptions that harm our neighbors and future generations. We are invited to pray for the earth, and this is right, but our repentance must go further and develop structures of virtue to offset the structures of sin. We inherit sin from the Fall, but we are now facing what might be likened to a second or deepening fall with a new societal level of sin.

What is the solution? We must counter systems of sin with systems of virtue. We must relearn the lessons of community, of sharing, caring and sparing the earth. Spiritual direction is needed to point us into parish as community, as a pathway for rebuilding the systems that integrate God, church and society. This letter is only a small introduction to the transformational challenge that lies ahead. We will either meet this challenge or perish under the burden of sin that we are bringing upon the earth.

Yours in service to God's good earth,

EM - EC - MR - FK

Climate Change: A Moral and Spiritual Challenge

It should be clear to all of us that immediate measures must be taken to reduce changes to the world's climate. If we fail to act now, the changes already underway will intensify and create catastrophic conditions. A contributing cause of these changes to climate is a lifestyle that contains unintended, but nevertheless destructive side effects. It may be that no person intends to harm the environment, but the excessive use of fossil fuels is degrading and destroying the life of creation.... As Church leaders, it is our responsibility to speak to this condition inasmuch as it represents a grave moral and spiritual problem.

We wish to emphasize the seriousness and the urgency of the situation. To persist in a path of excess and waste, at the expense of our neighbors and beyond the capability of the planet to support the lifestyle directly responsible for these changes, is not only folly; it jeopardizes the survival of God's creation... In the end, not only is it sinful; it is no less than suicidal.

But there is hope. Society can alter its behavior and avoid the more serious consequences of climate change. To do this, we must reduce the way that we have exploited the earth's resources, especially its fossil fuels. As Americans, we comprise barely 4% of the world's people; yet we consume over 25% of its resources and energy. Justice and charity for our neighbors demand a more frugal, simple way of living in order to conserve the fruits of creation.

In order to make the required changes, we are called to pray first and foremost for a change in our personal attitudes and habits.... The issue is not merely our response to climate change, but our failure to obey God. We must live in a manner that is consistent with what we believe and how we pray. This means caring about the effect of our lives upon our neighbors, respecting the natural environment, and demonstrating a willingness to live within the means of our planet. Such a change will require reduction in our consumption of fossil fuels as well as acceptance of alternative energy sources such as solar or wind power, and other such methods.... We can do these things, but it will require intentional effort from each of us. ...

Excerpt, The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States, "Global Climate Change: A Moral and Spiritual Challenge," SCOBA Declaration, May 23, 2007

Q

Why, as the bishops say, is climate change "a grave moral and spiritual problem"?

How is this problem caused? How do we verify this cause?

What might parishes and/or parishioners do to address this issue?

Reflection

Facing the Challenge of Possessiveness

Asceticism is necessary to fight against the instinct of possession, of blind power and a flight into hedonism. Asceticism is indispensable if we are to achieve that limitation of desires which will make it possible to better respect the earth, its rhythm, and the life which belongs to it, and to bring into practice the necessary sharing on a planetary scale. Asceticism is necessary as a basis for that profound sympathy with nature which is often experienced by today's youth, who have no other way toward the mysterious other than the beauty of the world....

To asceticism there needs to be joined what I call "creative exorcism." We need to exorcize the undeclared but invasive totalitarianism of a limitless technology. In this way exorcism becomes creative. It opens up another way of looking at reality through the most careful research. This is a way of looking which re-enchants!

The problem with technical civilization is the problem of meaning. Meaning cannot come from technology itself; it can only come from man, and then only if he sees himself as being in the image of God, and if he approaches the world as the gift and word of God.

Driven by this asceticism and exorcism, Christians must call upon humanity to unite in a common effort for the safeguarding of the earth, and also for its revitalization. Even the most secularized of societies need to recognize that an understanding of transcendence amidst the materiality of the world is necessary, and that without this understanding, there can be no proper distinction between the realms of society and religion.

HB Patriarch +IGNATIUS IV of Antioch
Lucerne, Switzerland, March 12, 1989

Q

Are there spiritual problems associated with technology?

How may the Orthodox Church engage these problems?

What might it mean to join asceticism with exorcism to address technology?

Reflection

The Photo That Changed Our Worldview

The earth-rise photograph taken in 1969 from the Apollo spacecraft shows the entire planet sapphire blue and beautiful, just as no human being since the dawn of history had ever seen it. This angelic view is foreshadowed and enlarged in the Book of Revelation, when John is shown the heavens opened and contemplates a great multitude out of every nation, rejoicing before the throne of God.

It may be that the choice between life and death always being put before us by the Holy Spirit is in our day being translated into a choice between one world or none. Theology and science ought to be partners in this work. We ought not divide the one reality, but rather seek – as one theologian has expressed it – "peaceful co-existence at the price of mutual irrelevance." (see J. Moltmann, *God in Creation*)

Conscious of the threat of nuclear destruction and environmental pollution, we shall move toward one world or none. We hope that we are assembled as those who are weary of defining their tradition principally by excluding others. For many generations the Patriarch of Constantinople has occupied what is known as the Ecumenical Throne. There is in that title a reaching forward to the End-Time of the healing of the nations, when there will be communion between God and human beings in a new heaven and a new earth "and there shall be no curse anymore."

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "Revelation and the Environment,"
September 22 1995

Q

Is it possible for science and theology to become partners?

What does it mean to "divide the one reality"?

How can the Orthodox tradition help toward the healing of the nations?

Reflections

Reflection on Technological Development

Whenever I visit Belarus, I acquire a good mood. I have seen how Byelorussia lived during the 1990s and can compare that with what it has now become. The changes are substantial.

When we visit Belarus, especially Minsk, we can see vast spaces, beautiful clean streets filled with air, and you understand: the authorities pay special attention to the quality of people's life. Because life in big cities is linked with stresses, and if such a comfortable space is created in a big city, it means that people are thought about and are a priority here.

Today, many problems come from technological development. Whether we like it or not, human civilization is developing in such a way that, because of the sinful desire by each individual to increase consumption (and this is a sinful desire), the industry develops 'willy-nilly,' hence the pollution of the environment and many other things that are detrimental to humans. Therefore the concern of the authorities for the environment, for the cultural milieu, for the spiritual environment shows that the principal strategic goals and tasks, on which the future of humanity depends, are taken into consideration....

Indeed, the quality of human life determines the success of political policies. And this quality includes not only the level of wages, but also the whole environment that surrounds people and ensures their wellbeing.

I would like to stress the happy state of religious life in Byelorussia. And I would like to thank you for the church-state relations in the dialogue between the Byelorussian government and the Byelorussian Orthodox Church.

HB Patriarch Kirill, Meeting with Byelorussian President Alexander Lukashenko,
Minsk, Byelorussia, 15 October 2018

Q

Why is pollution of the environment a sin?

What do you think the root causes of environmental pollution involve?

What is necessary for environmental pollution to be eliminated?

Reflection

The Joy of Genuine Thanksgiving

When Paul, the Apostle to the Nations, advised the Thessalonians to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18), he also counseled them to "always rejoice, and pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:16-17), thus demonstrating that thanksgiving as prayer and everlasting joy go together and coexist inseparably.

Truly, the one who gives thanks experiences the joy that comes from the appreciation of that for which he or she is thankful, and from the over-abundance of joy they turn toward the Giver and Provider of the good things received in grateful thanksgiving.

Conversely, the person who does not feel the internal need to thank the Creator and Fashioner of all the good things of this very good world, but ungratefully and egocentrically receives them – when the person is indifferent toward the one who provided these good things and thus worships the impersonal creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25) – that person does not feel the deep joy of receiving the gifts of God, but only sullen and animalistic satisfaction.

Such a person is given over to irrational desires, to covetousness, and to "robberies from injustice" (Isaiah 61:8) that are despised by God. As a result, that person will undergo the breaking "of the pride of his power" (Leviticus 26:19), and will be deprived of the sublime, pure, and heavenly joy of the one who gives thanks gratefully.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Letter,
September 1, 1999

Q

How often should Christians be thankful? Why?

What does experience show are the byproducts of thankfulness?

Why is a person without thankfulness also largely without heavenly joys?

Reflection

We Are Each Responsible for Environmental Quality

All of humanity is responsible for the state of nature - God's creation. Resource depletion and environmental pollution amid rising world populations raise this issue with special urgency for all nations to preserve the diversity of life, the diligent use of natural resources and the prevention of environmental disasters provoked by human activities.

The original fall resulted in a distortion of the primordial nature. Scripture testifies to this: "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but by the will of him who subjected it" (Rom. 8:20). Pollution and destruction of nature - a direct consequence of human sin - [become] its visible embodiment. Various manifestations of the sinful attitude toward nature, characteristic of modern consumer society, places the main purpose of [human life as] making a profit. The only possibility to restore the health of nature is the spiritual rebirth of the individual and society, in a true Christian, ascetic man's relation to their own needs, curbing the passions, and consistent self-restraint....

Guided by God's commandment about keeping the created world (Genesis 2:15), and caring for its spiritual and physical health, the Russian Orthodox Church is committed to participate in discussion of environmental issues, to work in this field, and to participate in collaboration with all who are concerned about environmental thinking in maintaining health and a normal life.

HB Patriarch Kyrill of Moscow and All Russia,
translation from Russian, Moscow, Russia, February 4, 2013

Q

What is the right and proper Christian way for humans to live on earth?

How might a deeper inward change of heart correct one's lifestyle?

What is required to "regain humility" and thereby recognize our limitations?

Reflection

Love for Christ Means Love for All Creation

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, God wants our heart. That is why anything that takes root in our heart and which we love more than Him, is sin. Sin is whatever separates us from God. Christ is challenging us in the same way today. We must all take the time to look seriously at ourselves and ask the hard questions: What is it that we cannot do without? What separates us from God? What do we love more than Him?

If we genuinely desire eternal life; if we sincerely want to be with God forever in His Kingdom, we must not despair of our situation but we must turn to Christ for help because, as He says in today's Gospel passage: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible...." This is why, the message of St John the Baptist, is contemporary. His call to repentance, is a call for all of us to heed. We must sincerely repent.... This means we must reorientate our lives, according to God's will for us.... Let us all love Christ because our love for Christ is all-encompassing.

Whether one is rich or poor, one should not cling to one's possessions and should not depend on material goods. If we are free from all this, then we really meet the conditions for the next step, which is the Kingdom of Heaven.

One who loves Christ, not only loves human beings, but also loves animals, plants, nature, trees, flowers, the sea, rivers, and, therefore, the whole world and all Creation.

HE Archbishop Makarios of Australia, Sermon at St Ioannis parish,
Parramatta, Sydney, Australia, August 30, 2020

Q

Why does love for Jesus Christ translate into love for all creation?

Why does clinging onto possessions handicap our journey to Christ?

If we love both Christ and God's creation, how might this affect our lifestyle?

Reflections

To Pastors: Devote yourself to the Holy Task given You

As Disciples of Christ, we entreat you to devote yourselves to the holy task that has been given to you – that of caring for those who have been entrusted to you and leading them in their journey to the Kingdom. In your eagerness to seek out that which is sacred, remember that "*blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Matthew 5:8). In order to care for and lead others, it is necessary that we first secure steadfast humility of heart. In doing this, we will bear the perfection of love that does not lead to the knowledge which puffs one up into vainglory, but to that which enlightens. For it is impossible for an impure mind to gain spiritual knowledge.

Next, we must strive to get rid of all anxiety and worldly thoughts, placing ourselves in the hands of God's ever caring and guiding grace by way of continual prayer. This is the spirituality that allows us to participate in the sacred presence of God.

It is noteworthy that men and women today are in search of a spirituality that will lead them out of the world's despair. The difficulty that this search poses is that one often resorts to self-centered, secular resources. In our attempt as pastors to lead men and women out of despair, we often resort to scientific resources such as psychology that may be useful. In these efforts, we must be careful not to limit spirituality to a scientific approach or methodology, neglecting the spiritual expressions of prayer, humility and denial of our worldly desires, expressions that allow us to participate in God's philanthropic grace. If we are not careful, we will only mislead those who come to us into a way of life that will cause even more despair.

In all our efforts, let us constantly imitate the First Pastor, our Lord Jesus Christ, who fully knows all the aspects of human personality and who expresses His philanthropic love to all men equally. In this way, our spiritual life will be as He is, the same yesterday, today, and until the ages of ages.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Conference on Pastoral Care and Counseling, August 16, 2005

Q

What is the holy task given to each of us?

How does this inform us about our purpose in life?

Why do some secular tools fail to transform or aid those seeking help?

Reflection

Humans are Part of Nature

Our Church does not see nature and the environment as adversaries of man, but as that reality in which we have an personal relationship and consequently in which we ourselves belong. Thus we become conscious of the fact that we are all part of this nature and consequently by protecting Nature we protect ourselves. That is, we assume, the safe path for our survival.

Hence, the whole of creation, our planet and whatever exists on it, is God's wider habitation. Man, as an inseparable part of this habitation of God, must be protected in every way... The same applies to every part of creation. In this way we show special reverence to the Creator. Under no circumstances may man create an opposition with his environment; that is, the wider space of nature in which he lives.

We must not fall victims to the new times where unfortunately many people from inhuman arrogance and the unacceptable issues of colonization and the inconceivable lack of control over the industrial revolution and the unjust exploitation of man by his fellow human beings, see nature as their adversary and enemy which they should besiege, pillage, conquer and rudely rape, changing her ... into a huge cemetery....

As Christians, we should respond to our huge responsibilities to save our Planet, so that we can honorably provide a united front to our great peaceful battle for our survival, which begins with the degree to which we are prepared to struggle ... for the reign of justice in the world as the only means which will lead us to in live God's real peace. May God bless you!

HB Patriarch Theodoros II, Pope of Alexandria and All Africa,
Alexandria, Egypt, Sept. 8, 2012

Q

What is a right human relationship to God's creation?

How do we show a right connection to God by the way we live?

Why do some people fail to promote protection for God's environment?

Reflection

Integrating God's Transcendence and Immanence

A special emphasis must be placed on the spiritual and religious aspect [of improving the environment]....

One will meet ecological concerns from a religious point of view if one takes into account the words of Genesis which witness the spirit of God in creation.

It is in this sense that the Romanian people emerged in history as a Christian people, understanding God as a Sun that sends out light, life and love, the uncreated energies, over the whole of creation....

Both God's transcendence beyond creation and his immanence in creation are very important for the efforts we make for preserving the integrity of the environment.

HB Patriarch Teoctist, Romanian Orthodox Church,
Constanta, Romania, September 25, 1997

Q

What does it mean to meet ecological concerns from a religious perspective?

What are the teachings in Genesis that shape an Orthodox concern for creation?

How is it that we all bear responsibility for ecological destruction?

Reflection

Consecrating Creation Back to God

As Orthodox Christians, we must admit our failure to integrate our theology with our practice.... The challenge requires a more urgent response by the Church. Our response, however, is fraught with difficulties and barriers because we are captive to a mentality of consumption and greed that is foreign to Orthodox Christianity and contradictory to the spirit of communion and generosity. Instead, we are called to participate in the “cosmic liturgy” of creation (St. Maximus the Confessor), where “everything that breathes praises the Lord” (Psalm 150:1).

We all recognize that we can no longer desecrate God’s creation. What we refuse to do is take the next step that is required of us as priests of creation, which entails consecrating creation to the Creator. Avoiding desecration is only a partial response to the ecological crisis; accepting and advocating consecration is the fulfillment of our divine mandate to “serve and preserve the earth” (Genesis 2:15). Such a sanctification and offering to God of “His own of His own, on behalf of all and for the sake of all” (From the Divine Liturgy) also unleashes a transformative potential and restorative capacity for healing and wholeness.

However, in order to heal the earth, we must purify our hearts and transform our habits. Every act of defilement on the body of creation is ultimately contempt for the Body of Christ. Whereas when we demonstrate respectful consideration for the earth’s natural resources, then we can also begin to discern the perspective of the kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (From the Lord’s Prayer).

HE Archbishop Elpidophoros, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of America,
New York City, NY, September 1, 2019

Q

How might we better integrate our theology with our lifestyles?

What does it mean to consecrate creation back to God?

Reflect on what it means to transform our hearts and habits? How do you do this?

Reflection

Why Concern for the Earth is Every Christian's Duty

We are all bound together by a deep concern and an active interest in the issues of the physical environment. ...

Various people, both within Albania as well as abroad, wonder and ask me why the Orthodox Church of Albania, which only a decade ago lay in total ruins, and which even today continues to have urgent inner needs, is so intensely involved in ecological projects. The answer is simple. An interest in the creation is an immediate duty for those who feel they have benefitted from God; it is a consequence of an Orthodox self-consciousness.

The horizon of Orthodoxy does not comprise only humankind. She has an immediate interest for the entire creation. Since the disturbance of the physical environment's equilibrium intensifies due to the careless actions of human beings, the Orthodox Church considers it her duty to invigorate – within her members and society in general – a sensitivity for the creation that suffers the worst exploitation of man's greed; to limit the consumer hysteria with a temperate "self-control" that forms an inseparable component of "the fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), and to cultivate an effective respect for the physical environment, stressing unceasingly that this is the work of the Triune God, who reveals the sacredness and liturgical role that all creatures have.

His Beatitude Archbishop ANASTASIOS, Primate, Albanian Orthodox Church,
Durrës, Albania, June 6, 2002

Q

How are all people bound together in a concern for the environment?

How broad is the horizon of Orthodox Christian concern?

Why do so many people develop an insatiable greed for acquisition?

Reflection

The Orthodox Ecological Ethic

We should state that there is an Orthodox Christian ecological ethic. This ethic is not an option for Orthodox faithful. It is not a theological “specialty” for those who have reasons to be interested. This ethic proceeds directly from our doctrine. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem said, “the method of godliness consists of two things – pious doctrines and virtuous practice.” Without any doubt, virtuous practice demands right attitude and action toward the environment....

The Orthodox Christian ecological ethic is ecclesial: it proceeds from our life in the Church,... and it is comprehensible only within the context of the Church. Here is where distinctions exist between our *ecclesial* ethic and the ecological ethics we find in secular society.

Within the Orthodox Church, how is the environment viewed? Is it a great reservoir of untapped riches, waiting to be exploited for profit? Should we view the environment as a living, almost divine being? Or is the environment God’s Creation, where man is set with a profound, symbiotic relationship, and a definite, holy purpose? Of course, the question begs preference for the latter. It should be obvious from Holy Tradition that the environment is better understood as Creation, and that man is not a separate entity, independent from the rest of nature.

We in the Orthodox Church see Creation as the foundational concept by which we understand all environmental issues. It is the fact that a creature is created that gives that creature meaning, value and purpose. This is true whether that creature is a human person, an animal, an insect, a tree, or an astronomical body. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of creation as foundational concept. It means that we must accept the reality of every creature as *meaningful*. In our Orthodox ecological ethic, we insist that man adopt a humbler, more honest and scientific outlook, in which he seeks to discern meaning in Creation.

HE Metropolitan Nicholas of Amisso, American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Church,
The Antiochian Village, Ligonier, Pennsylvania, June 15, 2002

Q

How is the word “creation” different from the word “environment”?

What is different about concern for God’s creation and environmentalism?

Why is every creature in some way “meaningful”?

Reflection

Humanity Continues the Work of Creation

Only when man accepts the teaching of our Church, that the Creator of all things is God, can he love the whole of Creation and protect it.

Man, as the crown of creation, has a special place on our planet. Man is invited by God to continue the work of creation, and simultaneously to look after it, to take care of it and to push for its advancement to whatever protects it as far as its survival is concerned. Hence God, in the first book of the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, invites the first man, Adam, to give names to the animals and to all things. This symbolic Biblical reference shows precisely our responsibilities to the whole of God's creation.

In order to respect God's creation we must become conscious of the fact that everything in the world belongs to God who created it. Consequently, we human beings are, under no circumstance, the proprietors of God's creation. Rather we are people who accept his commandments – His management. Hence, what is created... leads us to awe and respect. We become conscious of the fact that we have a serious role to act for the protection of the environment, which we all owe to the Creator, that is, to God.

For this reason, the ecological problem is connected to the problem of the abuse of God's creation, which is “the house of God.” Hence, the whole of creation, the entire environment, our planet and whatever exists on it is in this sense, God's wider habitation in which there exists and lives God's divine creation. Man, as an inseparable part of this wider habitation of God, must be protected in every way, his dignity and his human rights. The same applies to every part of creation. In this way, we show, special reverence to the entity of the Creator, the Three Divine Entities of the Triad God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

HE Archbishop Seraphim of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Angola,
Patriarchate of Alexandria and All-Africa, September 1, 2019

Q

How does love of God relate to the keeping of the commandments?

What does it mean that humans are the “crown of creation”?

How is the whole creation also “the house of God”?

Reflection

Custodians of Creation

We, as Christians, taught by the Holy Tradition and by the experience of the Holy Church Fathers, link always the mentioned [conference] theme “Man - Custodian of Creation” with the need of repentance. When man fell, due to his sin, he lost his identity. Because of his tendency toward transgression, man became weak and cannot find in himself strength to go back to his Creator. Man accepts God's love and becomes a being of communication, a being as communion, improving, with all the Saints, his God-likeness.

So man becomes the custodian of the creation which is created by the will of God for the only reason - to become one in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1, 22-23; 4,15). The human being is called to protect the work of God's hands because the deeds of God protect [nurture] him. The creation needs for its existence God, as it cannot exist by itself. Man is searching for eternity and he is determined to care for the conjunction of unity and differences. Love disables divisions, while the Spirit assembles all.

We are profoundly hurt by the divisions in witnessing the Christian truth before the modern world which is yearning for spiritual direction and the meaning of the mystery of life. We are firmly convinced that the theme for the 20th International Conference in Your monastery is for the good, benefit and joy of all Christians.

His Beatitude Irinej, Archbishop of Pec, Metropolitan of Belgrade-Karlovci and Patriarch of Serbia, August 31, 2012

Q

What does it mean that at the Fall humans lost their identify?

How are humans custodians of creation?

Why do you think there are divisions in the Christian world?

Reflection

Humanity as Priest of Creation

The Church of Christ has had to cope with many problems which are prominent in our modern world. The crisis facing ecology is one such problem that has grave moral implications for all humankind.

Orthodoxy watches with great anxiety at the merciless trampling down and destruction of the natural environment caused by human beings with extremely dangerous consequences for the very survival of the natural world created by God.

In view of the present situation the Church of Christ cannot remain unmoved.... The role of humanity as the priest of creation is clearly shown in liturgical theology. We are able to reshape and alter the world.

The vocation of humanity, as shown in liturgical theology, is not to dominate and exploit nature, but to transfigure and hallow it. In a variety of ways - through the cultivation of the earth, through craftsmanship, through the writing of books and the painting of icons - humanity gives material things a voice and renders the creation articulate in praise of God.

We must attempt to return to the proper relationship with the Creator and creation in order to ensure the survival of the natural world. We are called to bear some of the pain of creation as well as to enjoy and celebrate it. That means to perform Liturgia *extra muros*, the Liturgy beyond, or outside, the walls of the church, for the sanctification of the world.

HG Bishop Irineu [Pop], Romanian Orthodox Church,
Iraklion, Crete, 1991

Q

Why is the Orthodox Church concerned about ecological problems?

How is the world sanctified?

What is the role of priests and parishioners in this task?

Reflection

Every Person is a Priest of God's Creation

In the Orthodox Church, behind whose tradition lie long battles against ancient Greco-Roman paganism, a spirituality involving a deep respect for nature is strongly conditioned by the view that nature acquires sacredness only in and through the human person.

This gives humanity decisive importance and responsibility. A human is the Priest of creation as he or she freely turns it into a vehicle of communion with God and fellow human beings. This means that material creation is not treated as a means of obtaining pleasure and happiness for the individual, but as a sacred gift from God which is meant to foster and promote communion with God and with others.

Such a 'liturgical' use of nature by human beings leads to forms of culture which are deeply respectful of the material world while keeping the human person at the center.

HE Metropolitan John of Pergamon, "Production and Consumption," April, 1996

Q

Why do Orthodox Christians respect nature?

How is the human person a Priest of Creation? In practice what does this mean?

How may creation serve as a means of communion with God?

Reflection

The Care and Protection of Creation is Our Duty

The human is on Earth, not as a stranger who came to receive a monetary profit, but as a careful owner who cultivates the earth for future generations and takes care not only of his own profit, but also of the good of his neighbors and those far off.

Moreover, the care and protection of the Creation of God in all its beauty and harmony is not only our practical task, but also a spiritual and religious duty, a fulfillment of the commandment of God and a trail of moral feeling.

The Black Sea region has suffered from many sad consequences through an unreasonable selfish use of nature and this has been especially dramatic in our century.

Today we must understand the need to work together for the transfiguration of this wonderful piece of land, for the improvement of the condition of the Black Sea, the pearl of our planet....

HB Patriarch +Alexiy of Moscow and All Russia,
Yalta, Crimea, September 24, 1997

Q

How is the care for creation our spiritual task on earth?

What is necessary for a right caring of the earth?

How do we correct wrong habits from the past?

Reflection

The Challenge of Our Generation

As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has written: “Climate change affects everyone. Unless we take radical and immediate measures to reduce emissions stemming from unsustainable excesses in the demands of our lifestyle, the impact will be both immediate and alarming.”

Therefore, each parish and every individual should seek out ways of practicing prayer and care for God’s creation by applying the fundamental principles of scripture, theology and tradition with regard to our relationship with the natural environment by considering changes in our attitudes and habits with regard to food and travel, by reducing consumption of fossil fuels and choosing alternative sources of energy with regard to lighting and heating, as well as by raising and promoting awareness with regard to the divine gifts of water and air.

Every parish and community is invited and encouraged to open a fruitful dialogue on this challenge of our generation.

HE Archbishop Elpidophorus, Protocol No. 22/19,
September 1, 2019

Q

What is global climate change?

How might members of a parish address climate change?

Why is this an important issue for Orthodox parishes?

Reflection

A Further Dimension to Fasting

In an age of technology we should extend our fasting rules to include some forms of technology in order to gain spiritual peace during Lent.

At least during the beginning of Lent, us let try to be less dependent on cell phones, social networks, and email accounts, lest the anxiety, which they throw at us, get inside of us.

Technology can be a blessing, but it also has a very subtle reverse dimension, because of the way it fragments our thinking to a large degree.

We become so dependent on technology that it becomes very difficult for us to break away. I think it is necessary, in the world in which we live, to embrace such a type of fasting, a media quarantine. Fasting is a sacrifice and I think it is a sacrifice to give up our phone.

It would be very beneficial to detach ourselves as much as possible from those things that do not bring us peace.

HG Bishop Ignatie of Huși, Sunday Sermon,
Romanian Orthodox Church, March 1, 2020

Q

What is technology?

Can modern technology influence how we experience the presence of God?

How might a fast from technology become beneficial?

Reflection

Let Us Unite to Combat Climate Change

World Environment Day, celebrated on 5th June every year, is the main method of the United Nations to make people aware of the worldwide environmental demolition and to attract the action of various political and human resources.

The day's agenda gives a human face to environmental issues. It empowers people to becoming active agents of sustainable and equitable development; to promote an understanding that communities are pivotal to changing attitudes toward environmental issue; and to advocate partnerships which ensure all nations and peoples enjoy a safer and more prosperous future.

World environment day is a popular event with colourful activities such as street rallies, bicycle parades, concerts, essay and poster competition in schools, tree planting as well as recycling and cleaning up campaigns. The theme of this year's environment day is thought provoking "Your Planet Needs You – Unite to Combat Climate Change!"

We in Kerala are worried about the weak and sporadic rains in this season of normally heavy and incessant downpour. It is explicitly felt that the rhythm and balance in nature is disturbed. Although climate change can seem complex, there are a variety of simple actions that individuals and communities can take to make a difference. A few of the actions which we can employ are energy conservation, education programmes to create awareness, planting trees, using less petrol vehicles and recycling projects.

I exhort all Church members to observe the day with seriousness and learn to go back to the nature. A simple, natural and unsophisticated lifestyle is the best cure for these maladies. Let us join our hands to save our planet. Let us all unite to combat climate change and make this planet a commodious dwelling place for the posterity.

His Beatitude Metropolitan Paulose Mar Milithios,
The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, (aka The Indian Orthodox Church),
March 22, 2010

Q

How is global climate change a result of greed and inequality?

What does it mean that we are in the midst of a climate emergency?

What might you do in your community to address climate change?

Reflections

Sin Against the Environment

The ecological crisis is a spiritual problem. The proper relationship between humanity and the earth or its natural environment has been broken with the Fall both outwardly and within us, and this rupture is sin. The Church must now introduce in its teaching about sin the sin against the environment, the ecological sin. Repentance must be extended to cover also the damage we do to nature both as individuals and as societies. This must be brought to the conscience of every Christian who cares for his or her salvation.

The rupture of the proper relationship between humanity and nature is due to the rise of individualism in our culture. The pursuit of individual happiness has been made into an ideal in our time. Ecological sin is due to human greed which blinds men and women to the point of ignoring and disregarding the basic truth that the happiness of the individual depends on its relationship with the rest of human beings. There is a social dimension in ecology which the Encyclical [Laudato Si!] brings out with clarity. The ecological crisis goes hand in hand with the spread of social injustice. We cannot face successfully the one without dealing with the other.

Ecological sin is a sin not only against God, but also against our neighbor. And it is a sin not only against the other of our own time but also – and this is serious – against future generations. By destroying our planet in order to satisfy our greed for happiness, we bequeath to future generations a world damaged beyond repair with all the negative consequences that this will have for their lives. We must act, therefore, responsibly towards our children and those who will succeed us in this life.

HE Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon,
June 18, 2015

Q

What is individualism?

What is environmental sin? Can you name some examples?

Why should Christians care about the future?

Reflections

Everything in the World Belongs First To God

In order to respect God's creation we must become conscious that everything in the world belongs to God who created it. Consequently, we humans are under no circumstance proprietors of God's creation, but people who accept his commandments, that is, the rules of His management. Hence, we become conscious that we have a serious responsibility for environmental protection, which is associated directly with the respect, which we each and all owe to the Creator, that is, to God.

Hence, the whole of creation, our planet and whatever exists on it, is God's wider habitation.... Man, as an inseparable part of this habitation of God, must be protected in every way.... The same applies to every part of creation. In this way we show special reverence to the Creator.

Under no circumstances may man create an opposition with his environment; that is, the wider space of nature in which he lives. We must not fall victims to the new times where unfortunately many people from inhuman arrogance and the unacceptable issues of colonization and the inconceivable lack of control over the industrial revolution and the unjust exploitation of man towards his fellow human beings, see nature as their adversary and enemy which they should besiege, pillage, conquer and rudely rape, changing her... into a huge cemetery.

HB Patriarch Theodoros II, Pope of Alexandria and All-Africa,
Alexandria, Egypt, September 8, 2012

Q

Why do Christians say that everything belongs first to God?

What are the consequences of failure to observe these responsibilities?

How are the duties of a custodian different from those of an owner?

Reflection

The Human Purpose on Earth

The human being is on earth, not as a stranger who came to receive a monetary profit, but as a careful owner who cultivates the earth for future generations and takes care, not only of his own profit, but also of the good of his neighbors and those far off.

Moreover, the care of protecting the Creation of God in all its beauty and harmony is not only our practical task but also a spiritual and religious duty, a fulfillment of the commandment of God and a trail of moral feeling.

The Black Sea region has suffered from many sad consequences of an unreasonable selfish use of nature and this has been especially dramatic in our century.

Today we must understand the need to work together for the transfiguration of this wonderful piece of land, for the improvement of the condition of the Black Sea, the pearl of our planet....

HB Patriarch +Alexey II, Primate, Russian Orthodox Church
Yalta, Russia, September 24, 1997

Q

What does it mean to live on earth and care for the good of future neighbors?

Why is protecting God's Creation our spiritual and religious duty?

How can we Orthodox work together in peace and harmony?

Reflection

What is the Place of Animals in Orthodox Theology?

For members of the Orthodox Church an icon is not to be regarded in isolation, simply as a picture on a religious subject.... Much more significant is the fact that an icon exists within a specific context. It is part of an act of prayer and worship, and divorced from that context, it ceases to be authentically an icon. The art of the icon is par excellence a liturgical art.

If Orthodox icons depict not only humans, but animals, does this not imply that the animals have an accepted place in our liturgical celebration and our dialogue with God? We do not forget that, when Jesus withdrew to pray for forty days in the wilderness, he had the animals as his companions: “He was with the wild beasts” (Mark 1:13).

What the icon shows us – that the animals share in our prayer and worship – is confirmed by the prayer books used in the Orthodox Church. It is true that, when we look at the main act of worship, the Service of the Eucharist, we are at first disappointed; for in its two chief forms – the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom and that of St Basil the Great – there are no direct references to the animal creation. Yet, when we pray “for the peace of the whole world,” this surely includes animals. As one commentator puts it, “We pray for the peace of the universe, not only for mankind, but for every creature, for animals and plants, for the stars and all of nature.”

HE Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain, Iasi, Romania, January, 2019

Q

What does Orthodox theology tell us about respect for animals?

How are Christians supposed to view icons?

What do icons teach us about how to view the world?

Reflection

Teaching on Sufficiency and Restraint

The holy Fathers of our Church have taught and lived the words of St. Paul, according to which “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these” (1 Tim. 6.8), adhering at the same time to the prayer of Solomon: “Grant me neither wealth nor poverty, but simply provide for me what is necessary for sufficiency” (Prov. 30:8). Everything beyond this, as St. Basil the Great instructs, “borders on forbidden ostentation.”

Our predecessor on the Throne of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom, urges: “In all things, we should avoid greed and exceeding our need” (*Homily XXXVII on Genesis*) for “this ultimately trains us to become crude and inhumane” (*Homily LXXXIII on Matthew*), “no longer allowing people to be people, but instead transforming them into beasts and demons” (*Homily XXXIX on 1 Corinthians*).

Therefore, convinced that Orthodox Christianity implies discarding everything superfluous and that Orthodox Christians are “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4.10), we conclude with a simple message from a classic story, from which everyone can reasonably deduce how uneducated, yet faithful and respectful people perceived the natural environment and how it should be retained pure and prosperous.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew,
World Environment Day, June 5, 2010

Q

How does a person avoid the sin of greed?

What are the consequences of a greedy attitude?

What are some things that should be considered superfluous in our lives?

Reflection

Speak to the Hearts of People

When we pray to and entreat God for the preservation of the natural environment, we are ultimately imploring God to change the mindset of the powerful in the world, enlightening them not to destroy the planet's ecosystem for reasons of financial profit and ephemeral interest.

This in turn, however, also concerns each one of us inasmuch as we all generate small ecological damage in our individual capacity and ignorance. Therefore, in praying for the natural environment, we are praying for personal repentance for our contribution – smaller or greater – to the disfigurement and destruction of creation, which we collectively experience regionally and occasionally through the immense phenomena of our time.

In addressing this appeal, petition and exhortation from the sacred Center of Orthodoxy to all people throughout the world, we pray that our gracious Lord, who granted this earthly paradise to all people dwelling on our planet, will speak to the hearts of everyone so that we may respect the ecological balance that He offered in His wisdom and goodness, so that both we and future generations will enjoy His gifts with thanksgiving and glorification.

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Letter,
September 1, 2012

Q

How do we respect the ecological balance built into the design of the world?

Why is respect for what God has created important?

How might you communicate this concept to others?

Reflection

Facing the World's Energy Challenge

There is no single solution to the present energy challenge. We do not have to sacrifice economic security to assure environmental health. Prudence – the application of moral principle in service to the common good – should guide us to meet immediate needs in such a way as to enhance, not diminish future sustainability. And where there are genuine risks to health and well-being, the principle of precaution should guide our actions.

More investment in renewable energy and fuel efficiency is now a moral imperative especially because these are technologically feasible and economically viable. Energy conservation is prudent human action.

These concerns have entirely unprecedented moral urgency in the 21st century. In its reliance on fossil fuels, American energy policy is a cause of global climate change. With less than 5% of the world's population, our nation is generating more than 22% of greenhouse gas emissions. The United States has a moral responsibility to lead a transition to a new sustainable global energy system. Everything we do to assure safe and sustainable energy domestically must at the same time promote it internationally. We must join in binding international agreements which set energy conservation targets and timetables. Preventing climate change is a preeminent expression of faithfulness to our Creator God. Energy conservation is global leadership and solidarity.

HE Archbishop Demitrios, GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA;
 HE Metropolitan Philip (Saliba), Archdiocese of North America, ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX Church;
 HE Metropolitan Christopher, President, Episcopal Council (SCOBA),
 SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN THE USA AND CANADA;
 HE Archbishop Mar Cyril Aphrem Karim, Patriarchal vicar for the eastern U.S.,
 SYRIAN ORTHODOX (Malankara) CHURCH OF ANTIOCH;
 HB Metropolitan Theodosius, THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA;
 Joint statement: “Moral Reflection on Energy Policy and Global Warming,”
 February, 2002

Q

Why is energy policy a moral and ethical issue?

Why, as the bishops say, is Energy conservation “prudent human action”?

How has American energy policy been a cause of global climate change?

Reflection

Program Announcements

The Orthodox Fellowship of the Transfiguration is offering a series of tools and programs to help you and your parish to develop awareness of creation care in your parish and in members.

Pray for Our Orthodox Christian Church

That it can fulfill the prayer of our hierarchs for parishes to address the serious issues of climate change and protection of the environment.

The Face of God film

An Orthodox film on our theology of creation and climate change is in preparation. If you would like a showing of this film in your parish, please send a note to our office. Send requests for showings to: Fred@Ecostewards.org

Books

◆ *The Greening of the Orthodox Parish*

This is a comprehensive guide that provides vision and recommendations for what parishes and individuals can do to fulfill our Orthodox obligation to care for God's good earth. Available on www.Amazon.com

◆ *Transfiguring the World: Orthodox Patriarchs and Hierarchs Speak*

The Orthodox patriarchs and bishops have been eloquent in articulating a healing ethic of the environment. Study of their writings provides an education on the vision and the mind of the Orthodox Church.

Programs

Christ in the Wilderness 2020

Watch for a program announcement for this fall (delayed by coronavirus)

This 2020 Reading-a-day program

These monthly readings are available by e-mail at no charge. For a printed copy sent via U.S. Mail, please send a donation to cover printing and mailing costs.

Websites

<https://www.Orth-Transfiguration.org>

<https://www.Facebook.com/christinthewildernessprogram/>

<https://faceofgodfilm.com/>

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